

Committee: Scrutiny Committee

Agenda Item

Date: 12 June 2012

9

Title: Homelessness Report

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Summary

1. This report is to inform members on homelessness services and statistics within Uttlesford and the work of the Housing Options Team in preventing homelessness and dealing with homeless households.

Recommendations

2. That the scrutiny committee notes this report.

Background Papers

3. Appendix 1: Homelessness report 2011-2012
Appendix 2: Communities and Local Government P1E report
Appendix 3: Homelessness Budget Statement
Appendix 4: Government Mortgage Repossession Stats

Situation

4. The Council's Housing Options and Homelessness team was set up in light of the then government's agenda of focusing on homelessness prevention. The government's aim was to reduce the number of households making homeless applications to local authorities and to reduce the number of families living in temporary accommodation. The council recognised that a specialist team would be able to provide a more focused service to customers and to provide comprehensive advice and assistance to those in housing need.
5. The team with its focus on homelessness prevention has in recent years been effective in reducing the number of homeless cases, however the impact of the recession and the difficult economic climate can now be seen in the last year's homelessness figures which have risen significantly in comparison to the previous year's figures.

▪ Year	▪ No of homelessness presentations	▪ No of households accepted as homeless
▪ 2007 - 2008	▪ 53	▪ 34
▪ 2008 - 2009	▪ 48	▪ 26
▪ 2009 - 2010	▪ 27	▪ 10
▪ 2010 - 2011	▪ 25	▪ 11
▪ 2011 - 2012	▪ 59	▪ 34

The breakdown in the reasons for homelessness and the priority need category of those accepted as homeless can be seen in the Homelessness Report – Appendix 1. Appendix 2 is a comparison of data between all Essex Authorities for the quarter period of October – December 2011.

6. The increase in homelessness over the past year has happened in spite of the housing options team also increasing the number of households they have prevented from becoming homeless, as recorded in the table below.

▪ Year	▪ No of households prevented from becoming homeless through intervention work
▪ 2009 - 10	▪ 123
▪ 2010 - 11	▪ 142
▪ 2011 - 12	▪ 151

7. The council under homelessness legislation has statutory homelessness duties towards anyone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days. These duties can be to provide advice and assistance or they can be to provide temporary accommodation, permanent accommodation or both.
8. When a homelessness application is made the officer dealing with it has to establish
- i. is the applicant eligible for assistance, i.e. not subject to immigration control,
 - ii. are they actually homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days,
 - iii. are they in priority need and
 - iv. do they have a local connection to the district.

They then have to establish if the homelessness was caused by a deliberate act by the applicant, such as their behaviour or non-payment of rent.

9. Applicants who fall into the priority need category are adults with dependent children, expectant Mothers and people who are deemed to be vulnerable, whether this is through mental or physical ill health, age or other special reason. When an applicant is judged to be homeless and in priority need, they are provided with temporary accommodation whilst the investigation into their homelessness application is carried out. Applicants who are not judged to be

in priority need are offered advice and assistance to enable them to make their own housing arrangements.

10. The Council currently has 9 units of designated temporary accommodation but also uses some hard to let properties when demand requires it. If there is no other accommodation available or accommodation is required in an emergency then bed and breakfast accommodation is used. When a household is placed in to emergency accommodation they are referred to the floating support service to help them to meet any other support needs they may have.
11. Where the housing options team become aware that someone is at risk of homelessness they will try to prevent the homelessness. This may be by negotiating with the applicant's landlord or family, working with the housing benefit department on housing benefit issues, referring to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) for debt management work or help with defending a possession claim, referring to environmental services if the condition of the property is the issue or referring to any other appropriate support agency. The team will also work with the applicant on their housing application, if this is appropriate and where they are likely to be successful in obtaining a unit of social housing, negotiating with landlords to allow time for a property to become available. The team also look to using government initiatives such as the mortgage rescue scheme where appropriate, to assist households under threat of repossession through mortgage arrears.
12. It is anticipated that the number of households with mortgage arrears is likely to increase this year. See Appendix 4 detailing figures for 2011 and % increase from 2010. Uttlesford has been without a provider for Mortgage Rescue cases as our previous provider had reached their funding capacity, however we have recently been informed that another Registered Social Landlord is considering taking on this function within Uttlesford.
13. The team also tries to help applicants find suitable accommodation in the private rented sector and use the rent deposit guarantee scheme where applicants are unable to fund the required deposits, This is often not easy as many of the people the team see have poor credit histories and are often reliant on benefits to pay their rent. There is resistance in the private sector in this area to take on tenants who are going to be in receipt of local housing allowance, also the local housing allowance rates do not match the actual costs of rents in the district, often leaving people with a shortfall between their benefit and the actual rent.
14. The recent changes to housing benefit/local housing allowance are all increasing the pressure on the housing options service as more people find their accommodation no longer affordable and that there is a lack of affordable alternatives within the private sector.

15. Under the recent review of the housing service, the staffing levels within the housing options/homelessness team has been increased, with the appointment of a new team leader, who will be joining the council in early June. The council has also given part of the one off extra funding grant received from the government to help with preventing repossessions work to CAB to enable them to increase their debt management work.
16. The Council's homelessness strategy is currently under review and will form part of the new Housing Strategy document that will be completed this year. The Homelessness Partnership which was formed after the last Homelessness Strategy is one of the main forums for establishing future requirements to meet homelessness needs within Uttlesford.